

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## The Many Riches of Human Flourishing: On the *Veiled* Agent in *Veil* Narratives<sup>1</sup> Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan

### Introduction

I begin with the popular tale ‘The Elephant in a Dark Room’ from the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi’s *Masnavi*. An elephant was being exhibited in a dark room, and many people thronged to see it. But it was pitch dark and, unable to see the elephant, they all had to feel it with their hands to get a sense of what it was like. One who felt its trunk declared that the beast was much like a water pipe; another who felt its ear said it must be a large fan; another felt its leg, and thought it resembled a pillar; another, after feeling its back, concluded the beast was nothing but a great throne. Depending on the part which each felt, they painted a different picture of the animal.<sup>2</sup> For all its varied versions, the story continues to illustrate the dangers of partial or distorted vision and is no less relevant when it comes to engaging the agency of the female Muslim subject. This story, to my mind, has strong resonances for Malayalam writer Khadija Mumthas’ novel *Barsa*, which literally means ‘one who reveals her face.’<sup>3</sup> The blurb of the novel claims that in unveiling her face the protagonist Sabitha has in effect ‘opened up’ her very heart. The suggestion is that the narrative becomes a journey of learning through Islam with a free and ‘open’ mind. I want to trouble the value of this trope as a marker of enlightenment – a trope that often defines itself against the ‘closure’ of tradition, religious or otherwise. It seems to me that both the novelist and her mouthpiece are insensitive, if not blind, to the nuances of women’s agency, which the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy fail to call up – the dual registers within which the charged sartorial symbol of the veil is more often than not rendered legible. It should not be mere coincidence that the depth of insensitivity and misrepresentation is writ large on the front cover of the novel with the enigmatic image of a face half-hidden and only one seeing eye.

Feminist scholarship has often located women’s agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject. On this view, agency is reduced to the subject resisting or subverting relations of domination. What it all boils down to is that one is either being subordinated by or resisting norms. If a subordinated subject thinks that she is not dominated by anything at all, that is because of her false consciousness that masks the domination/

<sup>1</sup> I tried out an earlier, short version of this essay at the three-day international conference titled ‘Unveiling a Secret Agreement: Revisiting the Contours of English Studies’ organised by the Department of English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India in November 2012. I am grateful to the audience of the seminar for their questions and thoughts. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of *Transnational Literature* for their critical comments. Their close reading has offered me valuable suggestions on how to consolidate the arguments made in the essay, all of which I could not incorporate here, however. The phrase ‘human flourishing’ is from the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1981) 152. I use the term ‘veil narrative’ to designate any work of fiction in which un/veiling in any of its myriad forms and manifestations figures prominently as a thematic concern. Veil here indicates any of its diverse forms, including the headscarf covering the head and extending over the torso, and the face-veil covering the head, face and torso.

<sup>2</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *Masnavi*, trans. E. H. Whinfield (Forgotten Books, 2008) 107-111.

<sup>3</sup> Khadija Mumthas, *Barsa* (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2007).

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oppression for her, not because she is in fact under no subjugation. In an exercise of transference, Muslim women are usually presented as the stock victims of an oppressive patriarchal religion. In recent times, scholars have, however, called into question the assumptions undergirding this notion of agency and posited alternative ways of conceptualising it, not least in terms of embodiment and subject formation.<sup>4</sup> This revisionist scholarship helps bring multiple modalities of agency other than resistance to bear upon the study of women in diverse religious traditions. Saba Mahmood's seminal work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) is key to this scholarly enterprise. In her fascinating ethnography of women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood challenges the regnant tendency within poststructuralist feminist theory to posit a liberatory conception of agency on 'the binary model of subordination and subversion.'<sup>5</sup> This view, she argues, is restrictive in that it overlooks 'dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map on to the logic of repression and resistance.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, for Mahmood, it is imperative to dislodge the idea of agency from the interests of the 'progressive political project.' In this line of thinking, the modern notion of freedom and liberty as the political ideal does not exhaust the aspirations of humanity at large and there are specific cultural and historical conditions that engender specific human desires, including the desire to be free from, or subvert, norms. Then the right question to ask is about the ways of understanding operations of power that produce various types of bodies, knowledge, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not lend themselves to the model of progressive politics. It follows that the meaning and sense of agency, then, cannot be essentialised in one way or the other but it is important to engage the underlying principles that construct specific points of view. From this perspective, what might sound like a passive and docile case to progressive ears, for example veiling, may actually be a mode of agency if analysed within the discourses and structures of subordination that make possible the conditions of its

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<sup>4</sup> Both Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who is greatly influenced by the former's work, have persuasively argued that religious practices are central to the constitution of a moral self and produce changes in moral subjectivity that cannot be reduced to some other phenomenon. Unlike Kantian and liberal political theories of personhood which assume an autonomous and transcendent moral self, Asad and Mahmood argue that the moral self does not have any *a priori* existence, but is the product of a series of cultural practices and procedures. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also 'Preface to the 2012 Edition' of *Politics of Piety* where Mahmood reflects on the critical reception of her work and consequently puts in better perspective the conceptual architecture of her fascinating ethnography. Charles Hirschkind likewise throws light on the role of creative and critical listening in the formation of Muslim spirituality in contemporary Egypt. Devout Muslims develop a pious ear through practices as diverse as listening to sermons on cassette and learning proper Muslim speech genres. See Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 14.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 14.

enactment. So, as Mahmood quite succinctly puts it: 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.'<sup>7</sup>

Taking these insights as a point of departure, in what follows I wish to subject to critical scrutiny what I call the monologue of 'unveiled' resistance that animates the narrative of Malayalam writer Khadija Mumthas' novel *Barsa* published in 2007. Here I play on the word 'veil': veil both as a piece of clothing and as an act of hiding, as in the phrase 'a veiled attack.' The point is to show how the novel betrays a reductive view of veiling as passive and submissive through the subtext of a jarring monologue of agency conceptualised in liberatory and revolutionary terms.

### **'The One Who Reveals Her Face': The Sartorial Trope of *Unveiling the Face* and the Monologue of Agency in *Barsa***

*Barsa*, set in the Islamic heartland of Saudi Arabia, tells the story of a journey that starts at one airport and ends at another. While pursuing her medicine program, the protagonist Sabitha, a Hindu, falls in love with her local Muslim friend Rasheed. She finally decides to embrace Islam to take his hand in marriage. The couple then work in Saudi Arabia. The protagonist Sabitha is invested with the airs of a rebel Muslim right from the very first. She has her task cut out for her: to question a patriarchal/male chauvinistic Islam – a job she does almost perfectly, thereby leaving no doubt about her agency from a liberal-progressive standpoint. The novel, hailed as the first of its kind in the pantheon of Malayalam literature, earned its author a place among the long array of Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Leila Ahmad, or so we are told by its champions.<sup>8</sup> As for the liberal activists in Kerala who are too worried about the Muslim women's plight within Islam, the novel provided the right subject, albeit belatedly. The Foreword to the novel adequately reflects the monotony of the rave reviews that it has attracted: an attempt to reread a male-centered Islam from a women's perspective; a Muslim feminist novel, a novel that presents a free, 'open' understanding of Islam through a literally face-revealing protagonist, who in doing so, opens up her very heart; a protagonist who seeks to break the limits set by a patriarchal Islam, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Given the normative progressivist proclivities that have given shape to the novel's narrative, it is important to pause over why the novel was well received by a certain section of Kerala society, and this exercise, I think, will help expose the uncritical intellectual discourse that shapes public opinion in contemporary Kerala. But this, and the disturbing questions about the artistic merit of the novel, are topics that are larger than I have the space to address within the scope of this essay.

I will now turn to an instance in the novel where the author has her mouthpiece Sabitha espouse her revolutionary notion of agency that has a patronising ring to it. As the

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 15.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneword, 2006); Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> A. P. Kunhamu, 'Foreword' in Khadija Mumthas, *Barsa* (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2007) 11-16.

couple is just settling down in their new flat, there is a conversation staged mainly involving Sabitha, and their friends Dr. Muhammad and Abdu. The friends urge Sabitha to share with them her new experiences in Saudi Arabia, thereupon she replies: ‘Yes, I have got to tell quite a few experiences, as a recent convert and then... as a woman’ (47). Then she fires her first salvo: ‘(I) have lots of doubts, confusions about several things...but if I disclose them, maybe it will amount to blasphemy? Do Muslims have the nerve to take criticisms?’ (47). After a while when Dr Muhammad explains that Islam actually enabled social change by uniting the warring Arab tribes under the roof of Islam, she quips: ‘O, because those draconian diktats that were necessary to tame the minds of the then Bedouin Arabs are still constantly imported to our times, Muslims are labeled obscurantists, and are humiliated?’ (49). She cites purdah and face-veil as contemporary examples of the so-called backward-looking norms of an early, ‘primitive’ Islam. She is shocked to see women accepting such norms without demur even today. The dissident in Sabitha continues to vent her ire on ‘this out-of-step-with-the-time Islam’ that she is confronted with in Saudi Arabia, but this is enough to press home the black and white conception of agency that has created the protagonist of Sabitha – one that is predicated on the notion that acts of resistance to relations of domination exhaust the field of human action. That is, the model of agency that colours the construction of Sabitha’s character takes resistance to norms as the only source of agentival capacity. But as Mahmood has shown in great ethnographic detail, resistance far from drains the well of human action. For a devout Muslim who strives to submit herself to God through constant inhabitation of norms, agency resides not so much in resisting norms as in living them. Of course, inhabiting norms also involves acts of resistance: resisting one’s self-interests or temptations in submitting oneself to the will of God – to cite but one example. But this resistance is not geared to achieving the realisation of a free, autonomous, self-owning individuality so central to the constitution of the liberal subject. Incidentally, Sabitha’s ‘red strands of hair that have escaped her headscarf’ – a phrase in the novel’s concluding paragraph – may be an ironic statement on her own ‘self’ that seeks to ‘escape’ norms.

### **‘Docile’ Agents and ‘Willing Obedience’: Some Reflections on Silences and Erasures in *Barsa*’s Narrative**

Following Mahmood, I argue that Mumthas’ reductive view of Muslim women’s agency stems from her failure to delink the idea of agency from the aims of progressive politics that have sought to restrict the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power. This is not to deny the existence of this particular modality of agency, but to emphasise the point that ‘the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides.’<sup>10</sup> I suggest that what might appear to be a case of passive adherence to some backward-looking norms in Sabitha’s eyes is indeed a modality of agency if explained within a notion of agency that is not tied to the binary model of domination/submission. The unveiling of a Muslim woman in the spirit of liberatory endeavor constitutes one modality of action but the religiously-inspired program of moral formation, including adopting the veil, practiced by many Muslim women in Kerala, as elsewhere, and often decried for their patriarchal proclivities, is also a speech act that forms agency, no less. I find particularly useful here the idea of docility that Mahmood develops out

<sup>10</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 34.



of Michel Foucault<sup>11</sup>: rather than being a synonym for passivity, ‘docility’ in this line of thought takes on a meaning of ‘teachability’ that demands will, effort and perseverance.<sup>12</sup> This understanding brings to sharp relief the Foucauldian insight that specific relations of subordination enable and enact modes of human agency.

To illuminate the interesting paradox of ‘docile agent,’ Mahmood offers the now famous example of an accomplished pianist who ‘submits herself to the often painful regime of the disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability – the requisite agency – to play the instrument with mastery.’<sup>13</sup> Notably, the agency of the virtuoso pianist rests on her ability to be taught, to undergo the required rigorous training, which is a classic docile condition. Although ‘docility’ is often understood to be a synonym for the ‘abandonment of agency,’ Mahmood wants to mark the fact that docility ‘literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge – a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.’<sup>14</sup> Talal Asad also stresses the importance of the etymology of ‘docile’ as he says: ‘... I’m interested in “the docile subject” as someone who is *teachable* and therefore as someone who has the capacity to be taught.’<sup>15</sup>

More importantly, in examining ‘disciplinary practices’ such as the various ways in which ‘religious discourses’ control, influence, and produce ‘religious selves,’ Talal Asad points up the centrality of the virtue of ‘willing obedience’ in medieval Christian monastic practice.<sup>16</sup> Building on the Foucauldian analytics of power, Asad wants to think of power not merely as a repressive, external force but as an enabling, internal relationship – as potentiality, the ability to do something, to enact something in relation to other persons, things, institutions, and so on. Thus, the question that Asad seeks to forefront concerns not so much what meanings might be attributed to human acts as how one is able to do certain things.<sup>17</sup> This way of thinking about power helps Asad to remain sensitive to the conditions within which obedient wills are created. As he puts it, in medieval Christian monastery, the will to obey was a Christian virtue cultivated through discipline:

The Christian monk who learns to will obedience is not merely someone who submits to another’s will by force of argument or the threat of force – or simply by way of habitual, unthinking response. He is not someone who has ‘lost his own will,’ as though a man’s will could be truly his only when it remained opposed to another’s. The obedient monk is a person for whom obedience is his virtue – in the sense of being his ability, potentiality, power.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 29.

<sup>13</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 29.

<sup>14</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 29.

<sup>15</sup> David Scott, ‘The Trouble of Thinking: An Interview with Talal Asad’ in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, eds. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 287.

<sup>16</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* 125.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, ‘Interview with Talal Asad’ 271-72.

<sup>18</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* 125; See also Asad’s discussion of agency and pain in Asad, *Formations of the Secular* 67-99.

Thus, in highlighting the formation of ‘willing obedience’ to authority within the framework of the monastic life, Asad provides us with insights into how we may understand agency and subject-formation enabled by disciplinary practices in which one does live and inhabit norms rather than subvert them. Significantly, in this life world it is the very structure of authority or regime, rather than the freedom from it, that provides the conditions of agency. This notion, needless to say, sits uncomfortably with the normative conception of the liberal subject as a free and autonomous individual who makes or breaks his/her choices in life.

Also germane to apprehending the embodied character of tradition is the concept of *habitus* – a concept which, though first introduced into the social sciences by Marcel Mauss<sup>19</sup> and popularised by Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>20</sup> can be traced way back to Aristotle’s moral thinking and has influenced both Christian and Islamic traditions. *Habitus* is about ethical formation made possible by a certain pedagogical process through which a moral disposition is acquired. This process entails the acquisition of a virtue by a person through consistent physical exertion, assiduous practice, and discipline such that this virtue becomes permanently enmeshed in the person’s character. Drawing on Mauss’s formulation of *habitus* in his essay ‘Body Techniques,’ Asad employs *habitus* to refer to the ‘predisposition of the body,’ to its ‘traditional sensibilities’ – to ‘that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and an attempt is made to cultivate and enact them.’<sup>21</sup> One can see an echo of this principle in the fourteenth century Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) notion of ‘*malaka*’. As Khaldun puts it, ‘A (*malak*) is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed. A (*malaka*) corresponds to the original (action after which it was formed).’<sup>22</sup> The notion of *habitus*, therefore, brings to relief the constitutive role of conscious, repeated performance of actions – virtuous or otherwise – in forging and augmenting subjectivities.<sup>23</sup> This essay has sought to resignify the religious importance of *habitus* as a form of agency and consequently veiling as one of the legitimate means of self-realisation for devout Muslim women, rather than as the quintessential instantiation of patriarchal oppression and objectification of Muslim

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Mauss, ‘Body Techniques’ in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, Marcel Mauss, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> Scott, ‘Interview with Talal Asad’ 289. Also see Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* 75-76, and Asad, *Formations of the Secular* 251-52.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958) 346. The Khaldunian idea of *malaka/habitus* has been well explored by the historian Ira Lapidus in his essay ‘Knowledge, Virtue and Action: The Classical Muslim Conception of *Adab* and the Nature of Religious Fulfillment in Islam’ in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 38-61.

<sup>23</sup> In order to put in perspective the Egyptian mosque movement’s conception of *salat* (ritual prayer), Saba Mahmood also draws on the Aristotelian formulation of *habitus*, which is taken to mean ‘an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person.’ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 136. For Mahmood’s critique of Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* for its inherent socioeconomic determinism and inattention to the pedagogical process entailed in *habitus*-formation, see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 138-139.

women, as *Barsa* would have us believe. In so doing, it largely foregrounds the fact that agency exists and flourishes in ways that are hard to recognise through a secular liberal lens that is invariably brought to discuss and ‘reform’ the plight of woman in Islam – a lens that no less imprisons *Barsa*’s narrative.

I have invoked here the critical scholarship on embodiment and subject-formation in order to draw attention to the diverse modalities of agency that are often obscured, if not obliterated, by the dominant model of agency as resistance to relations of power and authority. Mumthas’ monologue of agency in *Barsa* demonstrates no understanding that divergent conceptual understandings of a practice create divergent subjectivities as well as social and political life worlds, and that it would be a mistake to privilege one over the other. The novel, I argue, betrays the author’s dis-ease with the modalities of agency other than subverting norms and belies the burden of proving Islam’s compatibility with the ideals of liberalism – a burden she shares with many contemporary Muslim reformers who fit the bill ‘liberal Islam.’<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the rhetorical claim of the novel to be an open assessment of Islam by a ‘face-revealing’ Sabitha – note that Sabitha’s capacity to undertake a journey through Islam with an open heart is contingent upon her unveiling her face – allows to go unchallenged the putatively secular foundations and premises of critique. Thus it becomes very easy to take the argument to its logical conclusion: a veiled Muslim woman, by virtue of her veiling and not displaying her face, forecloses thought and debate and is rendered incapable of carrying out the kind of critical task that the unveiled Sabitha is involved in.

This argument, again, stems from an uncritical acceptance of the supposed clash between what Mahmood calls ‘the secular necessity and religious threat.’<sup>25</sup> According to this dichotomous characterisation, some kind of ‘religious extremism’ or ‘fanaticism’ often associated with a host of images and practices such as suicide bombers and veiled women is said to threaten secular liberal ways of life and conduct. On this understanding, religion is understood to be closed, ossified, uncritical, and stagnant in stark contrast to a secular liberal worldview, which is showcased as open, reflective, critical, and dynamic. Consequently, critique is celebrated as the hallmark of the latter. Mahmood unsettles this presumed secularity of critique and debate that is taken for granted in any academic and popular discussion of religion today. She argues that the conjoining of critique and secular culture and thought is predicated on the assumption that unlike religious belief, critique requires acquiring a necessary distance between the subject and the object and some form of reasoned deliberation. This view often makes itself intelligible against religious reading practices where the subject is taken to be ‘so mired in the object that she cannot achieve the distance

<sup>24</sup> The term ‘liberal Muslim reformers’ is used as shorthand to refer to those who believe that the proper domain of religious practice is a putative private sphere marked by personal devotion. These reformers in Kerala are mostly left-leaning progressivist writers, including A. P. Kunhamu, who has written the Foreword to *Barsa*. This resonates with the case of Muslim reformers at an international level who come from a wide spectrum of political perspectives: some support the reformist trend within the Islamist movement such as the Egyptian Tariq al-Bishri, the Tunisian Scholar Rashid al-Ghannouchi and the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush; and some are inclined to a more straightforward secular-liberal line such as the Egyptian Said Ashmawi and Aziza al-Hibri in the US. See Saba Mahmood, ‘Questioning Liberalism, Too,’ *Boston Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2003) 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Saba Mahmood, ‘Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?’ in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 65.

necessary for the practice of critique.<sup>26</sup> As Mahmood points out, what is elided in this normative conception of critique is an acknowledgement of the ‘disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality’ that underwrite this particular, dominant paradigm of critique.<sup>27</sup> Put another way, there is nothing essentially ‘neutral’ about the secular liberal principles of freedom of religion and speech aimed at negotiating religious difference and these principles have their own ideological moorings tethered to certain normative conceptions of religion, subject, language, and offence.

My point in reviewing this contemporary discourse on the taken-for-granted ‘secularity of critique’ here is to suggest that *Barsa*’s mobilisation of the trope of open critique of Islam – as exemplified in the ‘face-revealing’ character of Sabitha and in sharp contrast to the ‘docile’ Muslim women she confronts in Saudi Arabia – enfold a normative conception of critique such that this characterisation becomes an instantiation of the supposed secularity of critique vis-à-vis the closure of an orthodox Islam. Thus, despite its complacency about the labor of open critique it has arrogated to itself, readers of *Barsa* will, however, recognise the woefully closed and lopsided view of Islam, and particularly of Muslim women, that the novel propagates. To say this, again, is not so much to pass judgment on which view is true or false as to draw attention to the fact that *Barsa*’s narrative is not an empty, homogeneous phenomenon, but is in fact complicit with a larger secular liberal worldview with its own naturalised, normative assumptions about what is religion and proper religious subjectivity and conduct in the modern world.<sup>28</sup>

A critique of *Barsa* in terms outlined above might be taken to task for its apparent religious obstinacy in dealing with a literary work which, in secular parlance, is presumed to be a world unto itself – a self-sufficient, free-floating entity unmediated by any politics and ideological moorings. The assumption is that such critiques taking literature at its face value issue from a lack of literary sensibilities on the part of those who mount them. However, I do not need to belabor the point that literature, fiction in particular, far from being an innocent practice, carries its own ideological baggage. It mobilises a particular set of images, figures, events, arguments, and narratives in order to construct and give expression to its cherished ideals and presuppositions. The various repertoires galvanised in a literary work such as its special images, figures, and events evoke disparate forms of recognition among its audiences who have diverse, at times mutually incommensurable, sensibilities – secular and religious, for example. It is, therefore, natural that depending on one’s personal stake and investment in the problem in question, a literary work engenders a variety of responses from its audiences. For instance, some celebrate it for what it is while some others resent it or even condemn it for the very same reason. Literature speaks to its diverse audiences with the intention of

<sup>26</sup> Mahmood, ‘Religious Reason and Secular Affect’ 90.

<sup>27</sup> Mahmood, ‘Religious Reason and Secular Affect’ 90. Mahmood here draws on Michael Warner’s thought-provoking essay ‘Uncritical Reading,’ in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004) 13-38. Warner in this essay situates the emergence of the dominant paradigm of secular critique against the backdrop of certain historical transformations in practices of reading, exegesis, and so on.

<sup>28</sup> For an insightful bunch of articles that call into question the seemingly secular bases of critique in the wake of the controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, see Talal Asad et al, eds., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Also relevant is Saba Mahmood, ‘Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,’ *Public Culture*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2006) 323–47.



provoking recognition among them and this recognition manifests itself in a wide range of responses that ensue. Thus, if *Barsa* could be legitimately hailed for its liberatory program of idealising the secular liberal, progressive ideal of agency, it seems to me equally legitimate to decry the work for its insensitivity, if not blindness, to other ways of constructing and enacting agency in the world. For, like the enthusiasts of *Barsa*, its critics are also very much part of the world that literature addresses, although they do not share its secular sensibilities, and hence they have every right to react to it in accord with the kinds of recognition it induces among them. It will not do to provide a celebratory account of *Barsa's* questioning a patriarchal Islam and thereby asserting Muslim women's self-worth. The elisions and erasures that are rhetorically secured in this account also need to be put to critical scrutiny. Reading *Barsa* against the grain by paying attention to the elisions and erasures enacted in the text affords us a better understanding of the issues that the novel is entangled in than a triumphalist account would allow.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Female Muslim Subject in Leila Aboulela's Fiction: A Contrast**

Finally, by way of comparison and contrast, I call attention to the anglophone Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela's two novels *The Translator* and *Minaret* which, even as they exploit as one of their key thematic concerns the role of religion in the protagonists' identity formation and personal development, do not, however, contra *Barsa*, commit the mistake of reducing the agency of the female Muslim subject to acts of destabilising or dismantling relations of domination.

Set in Aberdeen, *The Translator*<sup>30</sup> depicts the fraught and difficult romance between a recently widowed, devout, and veiled Sudanese woman, Sammar, and a Scottish professor of Middle East studies, Rae Isles. The main obstacle to their union is that he is an infidel and so cannot marry a Muslim woman. Sammar is the novel's eponymous translator. She works as an Arabic to English translator for Rae, and the novel suggests that in so doing, she translates Islam into a properly *felt* system of beliefs for him. Though the romance has really blossomed, the obstacle to their marriage remains and Sammar decides to go back to Khartoum to live with her son. All is well when Rae converts to Islam and the two are joined in marriage.

In *Minaret*,<sup>31</sup> cast adrift by a chain of catastrophes such as her father's execution after a coup, her mother's fatal encounter with cancer, her brother's imprisonment in England in a drug-related attempted murder, Najwa, the Westernised daughter of a corrupt political official in Sudan, accepts her desire for spiritual peace and turns to Islam. Islam becomes the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself. Through her growing faith she discovers a new peace and a new community. The prayer meetings with other women, the hijab, which covers her head, and the mellifluous call to prayer from the nearby mosque all give her an unexpected power to deal with her everyday problems.

<sup>29</sup> While examining the politics of the historical novel *Azazeel* by the Egyptian author Youssef Zeidan, Saba Mahmood calls attention to the ways in which literary works mobilise and engage various repertoires in order to elicit certain reading practices that assume the ways of understanding the world in one particular fashion rather than the other. See Saba Mahmood, 'Azazeel and the Politics of Historical Fiction in Egypt,' *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (2013) 265-284.

<sup>30</sup> Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (New York: Black Cat, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (New York: Black Cat, 2005).

The role of religion in fashioning the subjectivity of the protagonists in both the novels warrants a detailed analysis, but for our purposes here, I will only touch on it. *Minaret* presents an elaborate account of the hijab as clothing that is organic to a woman's entire ethical disposition. Najwa's recurrent reminiscences of her servants praying, girls wearing the hijab and students praying on the university campus in Khartoum, and the inexplicable envy and emptiness constitute stages in the eventual decision to wear the hijab – embracing the disposition that permeates all aspects of her life. The passages that follow attest to the fact that the hijab, to her, must mean more than a garment that covers her:

I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material quashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears ... I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined; something was deflated. And was this the real me? ... untie the material; observe the transformation. Which made me look younger? Scarf or no scarf? Which made me look more attractive? The answer was clear to that one. I threw it on the bed. I was not ready yet; I was not ready for this step.<sup>32</sup>

Although Najwa still debates whether she looks younger or more attractive with or without the headscarf, her introspection also gestures to the nagging feeling that she has always lacked something. It now becomes clear that this emptiness originates from the lack of will and opportunity to embrace Islam in a manner consonant with the disposition she must cumulatively cultivate by familiarising herself with an Islamic lifestyle. Finally, when she does decide to wear the hijab, she feels a 'new gentleness' and 'softness' around her.<sup>33</sup> That the hijab constitutes the final and not the first step in Najwa's religious discovery is testimony to its importance as more than a piece of clothing. It is clothing heavily infused with the modesty and sobriety that are gradually acquired and embodied through the aforementioned acts of piety and religious devotion. This is in stark contrast to Sabitha's rantings about the hijab in *Barsa* that we considered earlier. Thus, the evaluative frameworks at stake in understanding the practice of veiling in Mumthas and Aboulela are markedly divergent, and it is these frameworks that make all the difference to their contrastive portrayals of the veiled female Muslim subject.

Sammar in *The Translator*, like her counterpart in *Minaret*, chooses to wear the hijab and attend lessons at the mosque, much like the Egyptian women among whom Mahmood conducted her fieldwork in some mosques of Cairo, which eventually gave birth to *Politics of Piety*. Interestingly, Sammar even describes women as having 'softer hearts',<sup>34</sup> a phrase that conjures up for me the image of what Mahmood might call 'docile' agents.<sup>35</sup> In doing this, perhaps as an immigrant Muslim woman writer in the UK, Aboulela, much like her characters Najwa and Sammar, seeks to get visibility in a Europe where Muslim women, especially those who wear the *hijab*, are 'visibly invisible' to most eyes.

Much as her characters are assertive, Aboulela, unlike Mumthas, does not, however, take as the *raison d'être* of her characters the project of questioning a patriarchal Islam.

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<sup>32</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret* 245.

<sup>33</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret* 247.

<sup>34</sup> Aboulela, *The Translator* 124.

<sup>35</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 29.

Aboulela's characters accept the idea of polygamy. Sammar, after the death of her husband would like to become the second wife of an old man rather than remain alone. It is her aunt/mother-in-law that prohibits this. Polygamy is also a possibility in *Minaret*. Najwa contemplates it when Tamer asks her to marry him, "Well, to say yes, you must promise me you'll take a second wife." "What a stupid thing to say, Najwa!" "Because I might not be able to have children ... I wouldn't want you divorce me. I would rather be in the background of your life, always part of it, always hearing your news."<sup>36</sup>

Sammar and Najwa, therefore, draw our attention to the necessity of discussing categories of identity, women's agency, bodily form, political imaginary for a better understanding of how women can and do empower themselves through Islam in contemporary Europe and elsewhere. They invite us to challenge the normative feminist assumptions about women's agency that give rise to typical progressivist narratives like Mumthas' *Barsa* – narratives that are, to borrow Mahmood's words, 'encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, and ignore(s) projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms.'<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Epistemological Trap and the Labor of Critique<sup>38</sup>**

In conclusion, it seems to me that discoursing about the Muslim women's veiling – even if she does wear the veil because she believes it is her way of deferring to God – borders on the Islamophobic. As Joan Scott convincingly argues, one of the ways in which the issue of Islam and the West has been put to political use in recent times is to paper over in the West all of the problems of gender inequality that are now being attributed to Islam.<sup>39</sup> This then allows the Westerners to project their freedom and equal status by telling a story whose theme runs like this: since headscarf/veil is the sign of inequality, the Muslim women who take the veil are unequal in contrast to the Western women who do not veil and by virtue of it live in an egalitarian society. This rhetoric on the veil as the epitomic symptom of oppression then becomes a convenient way to overlook all of the (gender) inequalities that persist in Western societies. In reducing women's freedom to their freedom from certain clothes/norms, I have

<sup>36</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret* 254-55.

<sup>37</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 15.

<sup>38</sup> The term 'epistemological trap' refers to a situation in which the outcome of enquiry is predetermined by the very problematics and interpretive grids that inform it. Cf. Sheldon Pollock, 'India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500,' *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (1998) 43. Our analytical language is so deeply shaped by what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the 'disenchanted prose' of a higher, (read also, reasoned, secular, universal), scientific language that it is not possible for us to make politically meaningful statements without employing this normative language — a language that is constitutive of the modern world we inhabit — despite the fact that there are so many 'enchanted' life worlds and worldviews on this planet that do not neatly translate into this language without running the danger of distortion and misrepresentation. Given the problems of 'translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language' of the social sciences, it is advisable, as Chakrabarty suggests, to conduct such translations by 'hold(ing) one's categories open' so that one can take the master code, say History, to 'its limits in order to make its unworking visible.' Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Time of History and the Times of Gods' in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 40, 51, 52, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

argued that narratives like *Barsa* miss the wood for the trees. This is where I have found Aboulela's stories refreshingly corrective: much as her characters struggle to find their feet in an alien world that every immigrant is caught in, they present their religious tradition to be enabling rather than restrictive and recognise modalities of agency beyond the confines of subordination and resistance.

Also, my intention in the essay has not been to impugn the modality of agency tied to resistance to relations of domination but to alert us to the fact that this normative conception of agency often works to blind us to other forms and manifestations of agency that animate different ways of being and acting in the world. In privileging certain normative assumptions about critique, *Barsa* also upholds the forms of exclusions, erasures, and hierarchies those assumptions create and seek to perpetuate. Similarly, narratives such as *Barsa* proceeds *a priori* from an always already problem of Islam without ever feeling the need to give second thoughts to the constructedness of this perennial problem and start asking reflective questions about the certitude of liberal, secular ethos. Thus, at a broader level, my critique of *Barsa* is intended as an invitation to defamiliarise one's own confident, normative assumptions about what it means to be a human in this world in order to learn not only about but also from other umpteen riches of human flourishing on earth. Finally, although the sociality of Muslim women in Kerala, including the diverse conceptions of agency underlying their life worlds, needs to be explored in ethnographic detail, my concern in this essay has mainly been to comparatively probe the ideological fabrics of visions surrounding the female Muslim subject across what I have called 'veil narratives' in order to bring to light the workings of ideological suppositions that give shape and force to the narrative architecture of fictional prose.

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**Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan** (A. K. Muneer Hudawi) is currently a 2013-14 Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. He is a PhD candidate in the Department of English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. His research interests include devotion and narratives in South Indian Islam, embodiment and subject-formation, contemporary discourse on Islam, cultural theory, and minority discourse. Email: [akmuneer@gmail.com](mailto:akmuneer@gmail.com).